



You want my saree

SHOAIB AHMED SAYAM

Hello. My name is Katan Benaroshiwala, and I'm the best saree salesman this country has ever seen. It all started when my dad bought me a branded lungi with the money he saved by not sending me to school.

One fine day, I was on my way to see my crush from afar and flaunt my new lungi, but it was not meant to be. While I was jumping off the rickshaw in a masculine manner, my lungi caught on a screw and tore away my dignity.

With nothing airy to wear, my mom suggested I try on a petticoat as a makeshift lungi. And I never looked back. I took a small loan of a million taka from a shady person under a foot over bridge and started what turned out to be a haven of traditional female attire. My store, *Saree World*, now has 10 branches all over the city. Yes, even in Uttara.

You'd think I'd just sit comfortably at home and reap the benefits provided by my underpaid employees, but the sarees don't let me. You see, sarees are a part of me now. The fabrics are sewn into my soul. Even now, I sit at my flagship

Gulshan store every day. To me, sarees are the most fascinating type of clothing in the entire world. They're a continuous piece of cloth which wraps itself around a woman fold after fold after fold in an anaconda-like grip; it is an outfit that needs a thousand safety pins and a team of helpers to perfect. And yet women love it. This may just be the ultimate example of an unhealthy relationship. At my store, sarees come from all corners of the sub-continent alongside the local ones. I show no discrimination towards them. I love them all the same.

I've been in this business for five years now, and I've developed an ability to read the inner thoughts of the customers and provide a safe space. The store is a great example of tolerance towards different opinions and free speech. We don't get offended when a girl says that the saree we're showing is *khet*. We know everyone has different views. We're aware of the many experiences which developed those views. This is what these sarees have taught us. I know exactly which customer will like what. I show the middle-aged mother of two a fine cotton saree for comfortable movement. For the young

and modern bunch, I bring out my best georgette and silk collection. And for the especially patriotic ones, I open up my *jamdani* treasure chest. Rest assured, there's something for everyone at my wonderful shop, and no one will leave empty handed.

There are certain tricks of the trade when it comes to selling sarees. Depending on the person, key-words hook them to the piece. "*Simple-er moddhe*" is the go-to phrase when you can see the lady wearing something without a lot of designs and patterns. "*Gorgeous*" is the word for the opposite kind. Sometimes you have to show them a demo of how it would look when they wear it. Covering my shoulder with the *achol* so many times has destroyed my toxic masculinity. Now I know you can do feminine things and still be a man.

The best moments of my work come from ladies buying wedding sarees. I can see the glimmer in their eyes when they stare at the saree and imagine what they will look like on that special day. It makes me feel warm inside. They can be extremely choosy but I give them some leeway. There are some who come with

their in-laws and I can read their gloomy faces covered with a fake smile. So, I suggest the saree that the future brides have chosen in their hearts but can't speak up about because they need to comply with the standards of cultural courtship and say, "*Apnar jeta pochondo shetai den, ma.*" When they buy that perfect one it feels like a part of me went with them, as if I've been vicariously invited to their wedding and I'll be taking happy pictures with them. I love my job!

One thing I want to make clear to my customers is that they can't leave without buying. I won't let them. The sarees will keep on dropping from the shelves until they like one. I'll even order some drinks so they feel indebted to me. If they don't like the colour, I'll show them fifty shades of it. If they think it's too expensive I'll mark it down from triple to double the actual price. Mark my words, if you visit my store, you will choose one from the infinite number of sarees ganging up on you from all sides of the walls.

Shoaib Ahmed Sayam tortures himself by watching fake sports and Vietnamese cartoons. Send help at fb.com/ooribabamama